

Emergency communications take multi-path approach

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January 12, 2015

The Department of Homeland Security recently updated its [National Emergency Communications Plan](#), which “incorporates traditional and non-traditional communications methods, including those that allow first responders and public safety officials to better share information and enhance situational awareness,” said Roberta Stempfley, the deputy assistant secretary for cybersecurity strategy and emergency communication at DHS’s National Protection and Programs Directorate.

Over 350 federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial partners, as well as private sector stakeholders participated in developing the updated NECP – the first update since 2008.

“The 2014 NECP focuses on three priorities over the next several years: (1) maintain and improve emergency responders’ current Land Mobile Radio systems; (2) ensure emergency responders and government officials plan for the adoption, migration, and use of broadband technologies, including the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network; and (3) enhance coordination among stakeholders, specifically within processes and planning activities across the emergency response community,” said Stempfley in a [blog](#).

When the initial NECP was developed in 2008, Land Mobile Radio systems were the primary means for emergency responders for critical voice communications, according to the [report](#). Broadband and mobile data services were in their infancy. As a result, the 2008 NECP plan focused on ways to enhance Land Mobile Radio’s operability, interoperability and continuity.

Today, while Land Mobile Radio continues to be the primary method of communications, new technologies, policies and stakeholders are involved in emergency communications.

Emergency responders are becoming more connected to other entities that need to communicate and share information during emergencies, including public health, medical, and transportation agencies, and they are increasing the use of mobile data applications, including

social media, to do so.

Information security and privacy are new concerns affecting emergency responder communications. The increase in available, sometimes sensitive, data has led to greater concern over unauthorized access to this data.

“For the foreseeable future, the public safety community is expected to follow a multi-path approach to network infrastructure use and development,” noted the report. While Land Mobile Radio will continue to be the main means of communication, broadband networks are gaining importance.

“Broadband networks, particularly the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network, stand to transform how emergency responders will communicate by providing unparalleled connectivity and bandwidth that enhance situational awareness and information sharing,” said the report. Additionally, “the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network will offer emergency responders benefits that are not available using only commercial systems, including the ability to provide coverage of underserved geographic areas and the ability to prioritize bandwidth allocations for public safety use, especially during catastrophic incidents.”

Meanwhile, the nationwide broadband network [First Responder Network Authority](#) (FirstNet), recently got the OK from Congress’s FirstNet Finance Committee to spend up to \$42.5 million for network developments in 2015 and a further \$22.3 million for consultation, planning and outreach activities and up to \$21.4 million for organizational infrastructure, project support and administrative functions, reported FirstNet in a [announcement](#).

In the past year FirstNet has grown from four to 83 full time employees and established its headquarters in Reston, Va., with a technical office in Boulder, Colo., [said](#) FirstNet Acting General Manager TJ Kennedy.

Kennedy recently appeared before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications hearing on “Interoperable Communications: Assessing Progress Since 9/11.”

Kennedy told lawmakers he believes that phase one of the project will be completed by all the states within FY 2015.

“While the technologies have changed and will continue to evolve, one thing remains the same – the public safety community requires the ability to communicate in any situation,” said Stempley.

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